THE LIBERALIZING ARTS: CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY

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I congratulate every one of you for the opportunity to wear, as a symbol of your accomplishments, the mortar board of higher education--the most expensive cap you will ever own, or rent!

I congratulate you on your accomplishments, and those of your parents who have helped sustain you. For those of you who have run the long course of graduate studies, I recall with special nostalgia the dinner table comment of our five-year-old son in my fifth year of graduate work: "Daddy, what are you going to be when you grow up?"

I want to talk with you today about the liberalizing arts. You will be relieved to know that I have been advised to be brief. I am reminded of the story of Lord Canning and his preacher, who asked Canning one Sunday morning how he liked the sermon. "You were brief," said Lord Canning. "Ah," said the preacher, "I try not to be tedious." Canning thought for a moment and replied, "You were that, too." So much for brevity.

The Content of Liberal Learning

There was a time not long ago when we knew the content of the liberalizing arts. We knew what it meant to be a truly educated woman or man. We are not so sure today. This is because we are increasingly a part of a narrowing and highly complex skill base.

The liberal arts were meant to be broadening, not narrowing. They were thought to connect fields of knowledge, to connect the past endeavors of humankind with the present and with the future. Nietzsche once observed that animals are timeless. "They graze, they fight, they procreate and die in an eternal present." Not so humankind with its capacity for memory, foresight and thought. The liberal arts were to culitvate the spirit of inquiry, to discipline the mind, to participate actively in what Lovejoy called the "great chain of being."

I had occasion the other day to read C. W. Ceram's immensely popular Gods, Graves and Scholars, a book about the origins of civilizations. Ceram tells of the moment when the famous French scholar, Champollion, made his great breakthrough in reading hieroglyphic pictures. That breakthrough and other great intellectual discoveries,

Ceram says, were "the result of innumerable findings of a protracted process of training the mind.... Only rarely is solution achieved at a single stroke...."

What does that have to do with the liberal arts? It suggests first the importance of intellectual discipline. Even more important, Champollion and the scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries unlocked our past and made us a part of the grand human adventure which begins with the dawn of history 5,000 years ago. Our current neglect of the liberal arts means we are unable to communicate effectively. We are increasingly ignorant of history and culture. We are largely uninformed and uncaring about the great issues of public policy which animate our age. "We are becoming," says Frederick Rudolph, Professor of History at Williams, "a people without a common, coherent experience and memory."

The Despoiling of Liberal Learning

Why has this happened to us? What responsibility must all of us assume? I suppose it had something to do with the 60's and dropping requirements in favor of electives. The despoiling of liberal learning is even more linked to the burgeoning complexity of our subject matters in our various disciplines, the requirements these are thought to impose, and the decreasing ability of departments and disciplines to cooperate in any common enterprise, indeed the decreasing ability even to communicate with one another in cognate fields.

Meanwhile, student demands have shifted. Over the past fifteen years, we have seen a steady decline in student interest in virtually every field of study that is normally associated with a liberal education. Students earning BAs in English, foreign languages, philosophy, the social sciences and the fine arts dropped by 36 percent between 1971 and 1981. The natural sciences have sharply declined in the last five to six years. During the same decade, business and engineering degrees have risen by 71 percent. More recently, computer science has come on even more swiftly. Meanwhile, the fields making up the "human services" occupations have dropped off; social work, nursing, the clergy and school teaching. School teaching 15 years ago was chosen as a career by one student in four and now is chosen by fewer than one in 20.

The dramatic shifts in student demand are vocationally oriented. As compared with the 1960s, they are materially oriented as well, and vocationalism and materialism are probably linked with one another. Only 14 percent of your younger brothers and sisters arriving as freshmen last fall cited "influencing the political structure" as essential or very important. "Helping to clean up the environment" won support from 21 percent. "Participating in community

action," 22 percent. "Promoting racial understanding" only 30 percent. On the other hand, "being well off financially" won support from 69 percent of the respondents. Young people today, one must conclude, are more interested in doing well than doing good.

Be that as it may, we are turning out larger numbers of well-trained professional or vocational specialists (the lumpen Baccalaureate, someone has called them) at precisely the time when we need more men and women who can think creatively about the complex general questions that face the world. Sir Isaiah Berlin (in one of his conversations with Henry Browdon) observed, "As knowledge [becomes] more and more specialized, the fewer are the persons who know enough...about everything to be wholly in charge.... One of the paradoxical consequences is therefore the dependence of a large number of human beings upon a collection of ill-coordinated experts each of whom sooner or later finds himself...unable to step out of his box and survey the relationship of his particular activity to the whole."

The answer is to add to expertise those virtues that constitute the liberalizing arts which make possible the connections between fields of knowledge and the intellectual rigor to raise new questions. We need a bonding of specialists and generalists.

The Challenge

Permit me now an aside which will perhaps bring us back to the crisis in liberal arts with a fresh perspective. I have had some encounters with the medical profession of recent date. No one is more grateful than I for the recent advances of what Lewis Thomas calls "The Youngest Science" for there is, in our new, startling technologies the prospect, if I may put it very personally, of prolonging my life.

But there is an interesting counterpoint here. Dr. Lewis Thomas, the head of the Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, described his own reaction to a serious illness requiring advanced hospital technology. His account as both an expert and a consummate generalist is arresting. "Thinking back," he recalled, "I cannot find anything about it that I would want to change or try to improve, although it was indeed, parts of it anyway, like being launched personless on the assembly line of a great (but quiet) factory. I was indeed handled as an object needing close scrutiny and intricate fixing, procedure after procedure, test after test, carted from one part of the hospital to another, day after day until the thing was settled. While it was going on, I felt less like a human in trouble and more like a scientific problem to be solved as quickly as possible."

A close observer, Dr. Bernard Lown, Professor of Cardiology at Harvard, raises the question, "How have physicians grown to be purveyors of biotechnology?" (The same kind of question could be raised, of course, about the other professions.) "Our pre-meds and medical students," he says, "are very bright, achievement-oriented, taking top grades in scientific subjects. They are by and large intensively competitive and intellectually narrow. In medical school, there is intensive indoctrination in the management of complex technology. There is little time or effort...devoted to the cultivation of caring."

This is the area probed so brilliantly by Norman Cousins in his two widely read books. Some years ago, the former editor of the Saturday Review of Literature received an appointment to the Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences and the Brain Research Institute at UCLA. He spends part of his time teaching literature and philosophy to medical students. "During my clinical rounds, " he says, "my allusions to literature or cultural figures elicit blank stares from these intelligent, scientifically sparkling physicians. No one has heard of Camus or Sartre, and Strindberg is identified as a pitcher for the Yankees."

But the point is much deeper. It is this. Correctly understood, the "youngest science" is both science and art. Almost 2500 years ago, Hippocrates preached the importance of the physician-patient relationship and its profound impact on illness. "Some patients," Hippocrates wrote, "though conscious their condition is perilous, recover their health simply through their contentment with the goodness of the physician."

There is more. Without discounting for a moment the extraordinary advances in the science of medicine, there is the obligation on the part of the doctor "to mobilize and realize all those forces in a human being that work for regeneration and repair." It is in this sense, Cousins argues, that the art of medicine through the relationship between doctor and patient, needs to be recovered, "recognizing the existence of resources represented by the healing system and the belief system that activates it."

There are embedded here some ancient notions deriving from Hipprocates and Galen (they were, in fact, probably prevailing notions until fifty years ago) that link science and art, specialists and generalists, in holistic health care which pays appropriate attention to the patient's psychobiological constitution and is designed to help the patient to mobilize his or her own sources of healing power.

It is just possible that we may be finding our way back to the liberal arts in other ways. Campus recruitment by major corporations on traditional liberal arts campuses has been on a sharp

upswing until the recession of the last three years. Indeed, the number of recruiting companies at Harvard jumped from 51 to 159 between 1975 and 1983. The reason, one supposes, is that more traditional and less vocationally oriented curricula produce leadership characteristics and a capacity to handle new problems in fresh ways. A few enlightened companies have arranged middle and senior management seminars in liberal learning on selected college campuses. More and more law schools have introduced courses in legal ethics; so, too, business schools. I will let you find other pertinent illustrations. Yet, with it all, most faculties find it desperately difficult to combine the requirements of expertise with general or liberal education, and Clark Kerr, the eminent former President of the University of California, is probably not far from the mark when he describes general education on most of our campuses as an "absolute disaster."

Opportunities

If there is to be a rebirth of the liberal arts, of liberalizing values in the old fashioned sense of those splendid phrases, we all share responsibility for that rebirth in our colleges and universities as educated men and women--Presidents and administrators, faculty, students and graduates--all of us recognizing not only our role as specialists, but our responsibilities as generalists, that part of us which connects to the human process, enabling us, enlightening us, and mandating us to wider responsibilities.

I remind you, too, that each one of us, regardless of his or her vocational calling, has a deep responsibility to what we used to call "civic virtue." That, too, is a part of the liberalizing arts, learning how to function in a complex world where experts cannot be in control for they don't know enough, and where all truly educated people must be informed generalists, able and willing to grapple with formidable choices informed by careful thought and well thought through values.

I close with a slice of academic life from Doonesbury. (How I miss Gary Trudeau!) President King is addressing the graduating seniors. "Well, here you all are again--prematurely professionalized and chillingly competitive." As the slouching figures before him begin to straighten and scowl, President King goes on: "It could have been more than that. This college offered you a sanctuary. A place to experience process, to feel the present as you moved through it, to embrace both the joys and the sorrows of moral and intellectual maturation! It needn't have been just another way-station." "What?!" exclaim the scowling graduates, "Now he tells us! Why wasn't that in the catalog!" "Please," muses President King, "what's done is done."

No, President King, not in this business. What's done is never done, but always in process. With each of you, I celebrate that process which, in each generation, gives the potential of rebirth to the values that enhance the human prospect. It is true that never before has that prospect been more imperiled. By the same token, if we can learn to link our expertise, our specialties, to our larger responsibilities as deeply educated and deeply concerned men and women--generalists, if you will, in the liberal arts tradition--the opportunities before us multiply. Make your lives purposeful in this profound sense. Seize that purpose. Make it your own!